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Doctor says staff at private Youngstown prison aren't doing enough to prevent coronavirus spread

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This photo was taken at the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center in Youngstown on Wednesday, May 1, 2019. The prison is privately owned by the Nashville-based CoreCivic.

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By [Eric Heisig, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — A pulmonary doctor said in a court filing that a privately owned prison in Youngstown is not doing enough to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among inmates and staff, putting both groups in danger.

Dr. Venktesh Ramnath, medical director of critical care telemedicine outreach with the University of California San Diego health network, wrote that inmates at the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center are still housed in pods with up to 64 people and continue to socialize with other inmates outside and in close contact when eating and getting medicine. The prison has also seen staffing shortages because of people staying home, as well as drug use among inmates.

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While no inmates have tested positive for the coronavirus at the prison, the report says officials there have not required any social distancing measures and do not appear to require people to wear masks and personal protective equipment. Instead, employees believe that wearing protective equipment is optional, he wrote.

“(The details) reveal an infection control program in disarray in a high risk environment and indicate a situation that is at best problematic and at worst dangerous for both staff and inmates,” Ramnath wrote.

The doctor wrote his report at the behest of Carlos Warner, a federal public defender. Warner filed it Friday, along with a motion seeking the release of a client from custody. In the alternative, the attorney asked the judge, Solomon Oliver Jr., to implement several recommendations Ramnath detailed.

That includes reducing the inmate population, requiring social distancing, adding screening measure and providing personal protective equipment.

"Right now, given the operational protocols we know from the facility, the facility poses a danger to the community," Warner wrote. "If the additional facts above are true, then we likely have a burgeoning crisis at NEOCC."

(You can read the motion, report and other exhibits [here](#) or at the bottom of this story.)

The U.S. Attorney's Office has not responded to the motion in court. A spokesman declined comment because the case is pending.

The prison is owned and operated by CoreCivic of Nashville. It houses more than 1,600 inmates in two wings, with 680 of them being in the U.S. Marshals Service custody for federal cases. Most of those federal cases are out of northern Ohio, though some detainees are from Pennsylvania and New York.

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The rest of the inmates are prisoners serving time for convictions in state court.

While no inmates on either side of the prison have tested positive for the virus, two staff members and one contractor have, according to court filings and previous statements the company.

A CoreCivic spokeswoman on Saturday pointed a reporter to a statement that said each of the company's facilities has plans in place. The company recommends employees take steps to prevent spreading the disease, which includes having medical staff participate in the intake process, isolating those at risk and working with local health departments to test for the virus when appropriate.

Warner filed the motion on behalf of Aaron Gage, a 26-year-old from Lorain awaiting trial on a felon in possession of a firearm charge. Gage has been in federal custody since Nov. 6.

Warner wrote that his client is at a higher risk of severe illness associated with the virus. Gage is obese and likely suffers from asthma or chronic respiratory disease, along with other possible ailments, according to the motion.

"Keeping Mr. Gage incarcerated at NEOCC is putting his life at risk," Warner wrote.

The motion is one of several dozen attorneys with cases in northern Ohio's federal court have filed in the past month. U.S. Attorney Justin Herdman's office has opposed the vast majority of defendants, and the federal judges have mostly agreed.

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Attorneys have sounded the alarm, though, because they have seen what happened in other prisons.

The virus has reached inmates in other jails and prisons in the state, with the most notable examples being the state-run Marion and Pickaway correctional institutions. A combined 3,591 inmates at both prisons, or more than 75 percent of the total number of inmates locked up there, have tested positive for the virus as of Saturday. Fourteen have died from the virus, and another two deaths are likely linked to it.

The state has ventured to test every inmate at Marion, Pickaway and a Columbus prison hospital. Experts and advocates suspect the numbers are higher than what is reported in many other jails and prisons, though a lack of tests make that difficult to prove.

Warner's motion references the outbreak in Marion. It also says the state has quarantined all the inmates in its custody at the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center and is requiring staff to monitor the inmates daily and take their temperatures.

None of that is happening on the federal side, the motion states.

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At the prison, detainees in the U.S. Marshals Service custody who spoke to cleveland.com earlier this month expressed similar concerns, saying other inmates and staff did not take the virus seriously.

Ramnath wrote in his report that some CoreCivic policies he reviewed also appeared problematic. He wrote that a document regarding social distancing was "extremely vague" and that criteria to screen patients and control infectious outbreaks were either outdated or inadequate. It also says there are a lack of appropriate testing supplies, as the prison only has 50 testing kits.

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Based on what he reviewed, "NEOCC facility administration is inappropriately minimizing the risk of COVID19 in its facility, not just to inmates and staff/contractors but also the community at large," Ramnath wrote.

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